Partition stories, in first person

A unique oral history project will record Partition stories told by survivors across India and the globe

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Gurmeet Singh Bally’s grandfather refused to believe Partition was going to be a reality. He staged a sit-in in Lahore till he was cajoled in the communal theory that left him with no option but to leave. The father of three had several narrow escapes on the route to Amritsar. He was shot at as he drove down roads stoned with the bodies of his victims.

Bally’s grandmother had earlier escaped the carnage as she took a train to India with her children. A month later, the family was rounded at a refugee camp. But tens of thousands of others were not so lucky — they were killed while trying to cross the border to India. Pakistan.

Bally, a 35-year-old U.K.-based physiotherapist, grew up listening to these stories from her grandmother who remained traumatized till her death. She regretted not having recorded them and this propelled her to start the ‘1947 Partition Archive’ two years ago. The project aims to record similar memories for the first such oral history initiative using crowdsourcing.

“As part of the project, we conduct free classes to train volunteers how to collect stories. So far, 50 people have been trained and they have collected stories from nine countries including Mexico, Poland and even here,” said Bally.

Bally and the project has grown beyond her expectations in just two years and demanded so much attention that it forced her, in part, to quit her postdoctoral research fellowship at University of California, Berkeley. The idea for the project was first conceived when Bally was in a school. Around 20 of the 100 people interviewed have died while most Partition survivors are now in their 70s and 80s, forcing them to expedite the project to record as many stories as possible.

“We are meeting the scholars who will soon be moving to retirement, to collect stories,” said Bally. She added the Partition narrative has been mostly confined to Punjab, but the project will have survivors from survivors across the subcontinent and the rest of the globe.

The project’s India coordinator, Shohidul Islam, pointed out Partition is usually seen through the prism of politics and history, but these are stories of a common man.

“There is a story of a young Bihari boy orphaned during Partition. He arrived in India with no money and was left to fend for himself at New Delhi’s Rani Bagh, where the Indira Gandhi (Shahidman) management adopted him,” she said. “He grew up and was educated there and is now based in Canada.”

Refloating the story of a Muslim man who saved a Hindu passenger from a mob by hitting him in the first place of partition of a twin. It was remarkable how many stories have overcome the trauma and bitterness,” she said.

But the reunion of Ali Shah (72) and Tibet Singh (84) to the project is closer to her heart. The two were born in Gujjarwal village in Ludhiana, where six-year-old Shab’s mother and brother had been killed in the presence of his parents in 1947. Father Bhabh and a Hindu friend had rescued Shah’s mother and later handed him over to his uncle, who then took him to Pakistan.

The two met at Gomez’s home in California, where they are now based, and over tea, talked about the annual village fair and their school. Later, as a three-year-old Shah recalled his story, Shabbir remembered how a group of Almas were killed in his village and buried in a mass grave as they prepared to cross the border to India to save their lives. Gomez, his brother managed to save some of his associates Muslim classmates, who later left for Pakistan.

“Tales of Partition that are told in history books are mostly told by historians. But the oral histories are not only valuable but also personal,” said Shabbir. She added the stories instead of politics, discussing the effects of the trauma on a shared culture and heritage.